

'Affective encounters': live intermedial spaces in sites of trauma

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Abstract

This article addresses live intermediality as a tool for creative learning in the context of workshops carried out with young people in the town of Terezin, in the Czech Republic, site of the Nazi concentration camp, Theresienstadt. Live intermediality, as a mode of live media practice, involves the real time mixing and merging of sound, image, text and body, with a particular focus on the intersection between digital and physical modes. Employing both a written exposition and intermedial materials, in the form of a 'video-text', the article reflects on, positions and opens up this practice, specifically in relation to the 'affective encounters' (Bennett 2005, 37) it generated between the workshop participants and the 'traces of past people and events' (Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert 2000, 7) in Terezin. In doing so, I propose that live intermediality, with its emphasis on the real time mixing of diverse elements and responses, has a particular capacity to generate creative practice which is 'transactive' (Bennett 2007, 5) and where affect 'flow[s] *through* bodies and spaces, rather than residing within a single subject' (Bennett 2005, 13). With its focus on 'the act of doing as the generator of meaning' (Bryon 2014, 214), this practice prompted 'affective encounters' with aspects of the past trauma of Terezin, through the participants' live intermedial creation, in and in response to the present site.

Article

This article addresses the use of digital tools to create live intermedial spaces, where affects and ideas can be positioned, experienced and exchanged in the moment. Live intermedial practice involves the real time mixing and merging of image, sound, text and body to create a 'discourse'¹ between these elements. In this article, I reflect on the use of this practice in a series of workshops with young people in Terezin, in the Czech Republic, the site of the Nazi concentration camp, Theresienstadt. In this context, our co-creation of live intermedial spaces was a way of opening up the site, its history and our contemporary positioning there, activating a 'lively' and affective encounter with the present town and its past of trauma and violence.

The article comprises a written outline of the formulation of live intermedial practice within the workshops, which is placed in dialogue with some ideas and thoughts as to the 'affective encounters' it afforded. This is combined with a 'video-text' (see below), made of fragments of footage taken from the site, which are mixed with sound and text to activate my shifting sensations and memories of Terezin and the work done there. The combination of written and video-texts is designed to offer the reader both a framing of and insight into the nature of the live intermedial spaces we created. Though the video-text can be accessed at any point, the recommendation is that some sense of context is gained first through reading

the written portion, after which, a 'lively' shift between the written and the audio-visual, the analytical and the affective, the critical and the sensory, is actively encouraged.

During the Second World War, Terezin operated as a concentration camp and ghetto 'for the internment of Czechoslovakia's Jewish population and perceived enemies of the Nazi state' (Lappel 2009, 2), though later in the war, other European Jews were also transported here. The camp functioned as a 'transitional institution for most of its inmates', with the 'prevailing pattern' for those brought there being starvation and disease due to under-nourishment, overcrowding and forced labour, followed for many by transportation to the East and death in the camps there. The International Schools Theatre Association (ISTA) has a long-running connection with Terezin, which is the location for an annual three-day theatre festival, in conjunction with the Terezin Memorial Education Department, involving international school students aged between 14 and 18. As part of the event, the participants are asked to respond to the town as a 'physical, geographic, experiential site for learning', with this learning happening 'through theatre' (Robertson 2012, 13). The work is informed by tours of the former prison, ghetto areas, the Ghetto Museum and listening to a Holocaust survivor tell his story. What knits this experience together is the young people's work with a facilitator to create theatre and performance in response to their experiences and what they learn, across the three days of the event. The festival ends with an informal sharing of creative work and responses, which is usually in English, the language in which the majority of the international school students learn.

My role then, as one of the facilitators, was to enable this learning, through introducing workshop activities, which prompted the participants with whom I was working to respond creatively to aspects of the site and its history. The participants themselves decided which of these responses they would share with the rest of the group at the end of the three days, a process that I supported and advised upon, rather than directed. On reflection, our work together was about generating a space to encounter aspects of the trauma of the Holocaust and to 'respond to and hold in remembrance the traces of these events' (Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert 2000, 7) through creative practice. Jill Bennett points out that 'trauma itself is classically defined as beyond the scope of language and representation' (2005, 3) and argues that it is what 'art itself *does* that gives rise to a way of thinking and feeling about this subject' (2) that is of value. Following these ideas, I was interested in an active mode of 'doing' - of creative response - which would engage us in both thinking and feeling in relation to Terezin's history, prompting 'confrontation and "reckoning" not only with stories of the past but also with "ourselves" as we "are" (historically, existentially, ethically) in the present' (Simon et. al 2000, 8).

Bennett goes on to argue that 'trauma-related art is best understood as *transactive* rather than *communicative*. It often touches us, but it does not necessarily communicate the "secret" of personal experience' (2005, 7). This was also resonant, in that the participants could not be expected to fully conceive of and represent the experience of the inmates of Theresienstadt. Indeed, there are ethical issues with any attempt to do so. However, there was an opportunity here for them to place themselves in relation to that historical moment – 'to attend to traces of past people and events' (Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert 2000, 7) - and to exchange thoughts, feelings and opinions in response to this positioning, actively reflecting on the actions and events of the Holocaust as they did. Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert describe a mode of attentiveness in the remembrance of mass violence and trauma as 'an embodied cognizance that opens the one who attends' (2000, 7). A live intermedial space has the capacity to prompt such attentiveness, through 'opening up' thoughts, ideas and affects, specifically through the combination and exchange of visual, physical, textual and vocal responses in the moment of their intermedial creation. In this context, such spaces afforded an 'affective encounter' (Bennett 2005, 37), both with the present site and its history.

Bennett highlights the importance of affect in trauma-related art, specifically the making of work as 'registering and producing affect; affect not as opposed to or distinct from thought, but as the means by which a kind of understanding is produced' (2005, 36). She positions the notions of affect and sensation in a Deleuzian framework, whereby 'sensation' emerges from the 'artist's engagement with the medium' (37) in the moment of creation and the affective encounter of the creating subject with an artwork, 'agitates, compelling and fuelling inquiry' to 'stimulate thought' (37). Following this, as intermedial artists, 'sensation' arose specifically through the generating and mixing of the elements referenced above and it was such intermedial acts which 'stimulated thought' in relation to the present site of Terezin, its history and our positioning there. The act of intermedial combination, as outlined below and which can also be experienced in the video-text, was the crucial factor in the 'affective encounters' generated between past trauma and present response.

As the facilitator, I employed a series of prompts, briefs and stimuli as points of departure for the creation of these live intermedial spaces. These were drawn from the long tours we did of the small fortress, which functioned as a prison during the war, the areas of the town used as ghettos, the Ghetto Museum and finally the crematorium and the old railway, which led east to the death camps. Bombarded with horrific statistics related to the treatment and deaths of those interned in Theresienstadt - physically and emotionally tired – many of us started to experience, to a greater or lesser degree, an inability to feel in relation to the magnitude of suffering evoked. It was this aspect of the experience, which I wanted to

address, through opening up intermedial spaces in order to draw out, formulate and exchange responses, which could not be expressed within the context of the tour.

This also relates to my thinking around the operation specifically of *live* intermediality, where the mixing of media happens in real time and that construction is part of the event generated. This type of making operates as a particular 'active aesthetic', in that it places emphasis, through the real time activation of the materials, on 'the act of doing as the generator of meaning' (Bryon 2014, 214) and 'our process in the act of performing' (43). This links it back to Bennett's thoughts about *transactive* modes of art-making and a Deleuzian perspective of the sensation created in the making of the work, where 'the emphasis shifts from expression to production, from object to process' (Bennett 2005, 37-38). Live intermediality generates, in my experience, a lively 'discourse' in the moment of activation, as a layered, shifting and composite space is made, which is characterised by movement, play and interaction (see video-text below). The play of signification and affect between media elements in live intermedial spaces enacts this discourse, allowing for a number of ideas and responses to be exchanged in the moment of their activation. This again links back to Bennett's conception of 'a form of memory for more than one subject, inhabited in different modalities by different people' (11) and also to remembrance in these instances, functioning as 'an indelibly social praxis' (Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert 2000, 2). In live intermedial practices, the 'social praxis' manifests in the exchanges of responses in the moment of their activation – a 'lively' encounter between individuals' actions in the present site and 'traces of past people and events' (Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert 2000, 7). This encounter is activated through intersections between digital and physical modes, as explored below.

To generate materials to work with, we engaged in a number of activities responding to the sites on the tour. For instance, individuals were initially given prompts to create short texts in response to these sites. Each participant then came together with a partner and shared aspects of the texts they had written to create 'word duets'. This involved finding striking and engaging intersections between the texts and diverse ways for the words to be combined, considering aspects such as pace, rhythm, counterpoint, repetition and canon. The groups played with how these duets could be positioned in space and in relation to sections of the video footage I had gathered of the tour sites. These shaky, digitised records became part of our intermedial making, through being mixed and merged using the VJ software, Modul8² and combined in real time with the textual, vocal and physical responses of the participants.

The shaping of the digital-physical combinations was a key aspect in developing the work. It involved consideration of the positioning of bodies in relation to the digital projection, the resonances in movement between body and image, the timing of the shifting between images, as this connected to text

and movement, all of which generated discourse between our positioning in the present site of Terezin and its history. The interplay between the virtual image and the actual bodies of the participants proved a particularly affective aspect of this discourse, with the digital images of the physical sites of Terezin becoming a vital and 'agitating' aspect of the work. The participants' engagement with the capacities of the VJ-ing software and the creation of different combinations of digital image, body, movement and text, was a 'coming into language' (Bennett 2005, 2). We remained in process with these intermedial combinations; moving between them, holding some before shifting to others, creating work that is 'fundamentally relational rather than expressive in the traditional (communicative) sense of that term' (Bennett 2005, 12). Again, something of the nature of these shifting combinations and the discourses they generate can be experienced through watching the video-text below.

It is also in such combinations, that the lively, shifting and multi-layered nature of live intermediality can open up a 'transactive' space, where affect 'flow[s] *through* bodies and spaces, rather than residing within a single subject' (Bennett 2005, 13). In Terezin, the diversity of responses, ideas, modes and media generated a lively interplay between the present and the past, the site and what happened there, our privileged position and the inhumane conditions under which those interned here lived. The participants responded particularly strongly to the digital-physical intersections, which this creative mode afforded and which generated an affective discourse, through their combinations of body, digital image and physical location. Something of this 'discourse' is evident in the shifting of intermedial spaces in the video-text below, which comprises the second section of this article and which activates something of my experience of the site and the live intermedial work created there. This is not in any way documentation of that work or a live intermedial event in itself. Rather, it functions in a 'transactive' mode, as an affective and critical exchange of materials, memories and affects, related to the experience of being in Terezin and the intermedial practice created there.

Video-Text Commentary (for website)

This 'video-text' is comprised of fragments of footage of Terezin, in the Czech Republic. These are mixed with sound and text to activate my shifting sensations, memories and experience of the site and the live intermedial work created by a group of international school students, in response to their time there. This is not documentation of the work they created and rather, the combinations of sound, image and text emerge from my fragmented memories of the site and the practice generated, offering something of the experience of being in and making work in response to Terezin and its history.

The 'video-text' is designed to be experienced alongside and in relation to the written article, which offers some context for the intermedial practice generated in this 'site of trauma' and thoughts as to the 'affective encounters' this work afforded us.

Link to video text: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eY0uMdf7DHs>

Word Count: 2092 (not including abstract)

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Notes

1. In employing this term, I am referencing a Derridean formation of discourse as a 'system of differences' (1978, 354). In live intermediality, such 'differences' exist as a layered, shifting site of 'play' and becoming. The term also speaks to and of the active 'conversation' between media in the practice.
2. The VJ software, Modul8, is designed for 'real time video mixing and compositing' (garageCUBE 2014) and allows for pre-recorded and live footage to be activated, layered and manipulated in a variety of ways.

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